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The Zealots represented a principle and a policy that the other groups did not share. The Sadducees lived a good life and sought power in high places. The Pharisees believed that it was God's will to live in the world in which God had placed them, to remain pure, and to meet the temptations, the dangers, and the trials. And the Essenes simply fled from the conflict and took refuge in their desert commune. But opposite the Essenes were the Zealots who would confront any opposition directly.

The Name "Zealot"

The name "Zealot" was first used by Josephus to describe the militant Jews in the War of 66-70. But the designation has come to be used of all who rebelled against Rome with force. The name itself is not difficult; it describes one who is filled with zeal or passionate intensity to fight for some threatened institution or ideal. The term carries the connotation of a fanatic, one who was ready to go to extreme violence against Gentile oppressors.

Descriptions of the Rebel Groups

Josephus refers to the Zealots as the "fourth Jewish philosophy," founded by Judas the Galilean (in 6 A.D.); he strongly contends that all succeeding troubles including the burning of the Temple can be traced to his teaching. Gowan is correct to note that Josephus, who had turned to the Romans, is most certainly offering a politically acceptable assessment of these sworn enemies of Rome that he calls "bandits." It is difficult to discover reliable information about the zealots when Josephus, who opposed them bitterly, is the only source.

Gowan lists several individuals and groups who rebelled against Rome with violence; while the term Zealot applies to only some of the "players" as he calls them, it is often used for any of these rebel factions. Hezekiah, the father of Judas, was executed by Herod around 46 B.C. Josephus calls him a robber-chieftain; he sounded the first note of militant rebellion. It must have been a significant event, for the Sanhedrin wanted to try Herod for his execution. Judas of Galilee, his son, is known as the founder of the Zealots. Herford compares Judas to Mattathias (167 B.C.) in that he gathered around him those that were zealous for the Torah; they

showed the same zeal. But there is one major difference: in the days of Judas the Jews were free to worship as they wished for the most part. At any rate, Judas revolted against Rome over the census that was taken by Quirinius. The death of Judas is referred to by Gamaliel in Acts 5:37. James and Simon, the sons of Judas, continued the rebellion and were crucified in 46 or 48 A.D. The Sicarii (from the Latin sicarius, a short sword or dagger) were a group of rebels who fought in the time of Felix; they killed the High Priest Jonathan, fled to the desert and held Masada until 73. Eleazar, the son of the High Priest Ananias, contributed to the beginning of the revolt in 66 by making the priests stop offering daily sacrifices for Caesar. Menahem, the son of Judas, obtained weapons from Masada and came to Jerusalem to try to establish some kind of reign. He was killed by other rebels. Eleazar, the son of Jairus, a relative of Menahem, fled to Masada and led the futile resistance of 70-73. The actual Zealots were the extremists in Jerusalem who tried to seize power after the fall of Galilee in 67, 68. They basically carried on terrorist activities. John of Gischala was also an important rebel; he tried to take royal authority in Jerusalem, betrayed the people in the process, and was eventually captured at the fall of Jerusalem. Simon bar Giora attempted to take Jerusalem; he controlled the south. Galileans, followers of John of Gischala, are described as transvestite assassins. Eleazar, son of Simon, was the leader of the Zealots when they revolted against John.

So when Titus was on his way to destroy Jerusalem, there were three groups of rebels in the city: Eleazar and the Zealots held the Temple, John controlled the upper city, and Simon controlled the lower city. These were all disparate groups and individuals; but because they all had essentially the same goal, and similar methods, they can be grouped together under a discussion of zealots. Gowan concludes that it can be called a movement because (1) Josephus calls it the fourth philosophy, and (2) it was a dynasty of rebels--most of them seem to be related to each other in some way. Judas probably was not a founder in the strict sense, but his teachings and his zeal influenced the rest. They were basically fanatics, waging war on all who opposed them, but certainly exhibiting bravery, for they endured sieges and torture rather than call anyone "lord" other than God.

The Beliefs of the Zealots

The movement was religious, but certainly an activist one. The common ground for all these Jewish parties was the Torah. But unlike the Pharisees the Zealots offered no new conception of the Law; they were not out to interpret it, just to fight for it to assert all that it demanded. Herford summarizes the simple ideas that they

believed the Torah demanded: 1) YHWH was the only king that the Jews would acknowledge; 2) they would establish His reign by rooting out paganism and by breaking the yoke of tyranny; 3) the Torah made separation from Gentiles necessary, exalted Israel as the chosen of God, and promised triumph. The zealots would seek to enforce these beliefs by violence of any kind. In the end, though, they lost their sense of order and their high motivation.

According to Josephus, Judas called the Jews cowards if they continued paying taxes to Rome or agreed to submit in other ways to any but God; to him, taxation was slavery. In many things they probably agreed with the Pharisees—but they had a passion for liberty. The Pharisees, of course, were not zealots; they were swept into these wars against their will. They might have been more sympathetic at the outset, but not in the final conflicts which led inevitably to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish state.

Concluding Observations

The Zealots do not figure prominently in the biblical records. But there are references to them. One of the twelve, Simon Zelotes (Mk.3:18) was probably a member of some group originally. Barabbas was clearly a zealot; the term used to describe him in John 18:40 is the same word used by Josephus to describe the Zealots. And possibly Judas Iscariot had leanings towards their ideas.

But Jesus never openly refers to the Zealots. His statement that men try to take the kingdom by force (Mt. 11:12) has been interpreted as a criticism of such misguided zeal. Whether it refers to the Zealots or not is debated; Hengel argues against the connection.

There is nothing wrong with zeal, of course; it is based on biblical teachings and is absolutely essential for Christianity to succeed. Jesus Himself was filled with the zeal of the Lord when he cleansed the Temple. But zeal for the work of the Lord is totally different from the attitudes and actions of the zealots--they were not doing the will of the Lord. In the history of the Church there are many examples of such misguided zeal, most notably, the crusades. And the history of the Church is also stained with individuals who seized political power along with their religious authority. Even today there are individuals orgroupsofChristianzealotswhooccasionallytryseektofulfilltheirmissionbyviolence. Jesus taught that His kingdom was not of this world, otherwise His servants would fight; and that the work of His kingdom must not be enveloped in violence—no matter how much zeal the participants may have. We shall see more of this

contrast in the subsequent chapters.

Herford, p. 64.

See the discussion of groups in Martin Hengel, *The Zealots* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), pp. 24-75.

The term in Hebrew can be translated "zeal" or "jealousy." The term describes the burning passion for a cause. If it is used in the negative sense, it would refer to envy, the burning desire for something off-limits.

Herford, p. 66.

Gowan, p. 201.

Ibid., pp. 203,4.

Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.158-160; *Wars*, 1.204,5.

Herford, p. 67.

Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20. 102.

Josephus, *Wars*, 2.254-457; 4.400-405.

Josephus, *Wars*, 2.409.

Josephus, *Wars*, 2.433-448.

Josephus, *Wars*, 7.253.

Josephus, *Wars*, 4.160ff.

Josephus, *Wars*, 4.84ff.

Josephus, *Wars*, 4.558-563.

Gowan, p. 205.

Ibid., 207.

Herford, pp. 68,69.

For a detailed discussion of this conviction, see Hengel, *The Zealots*, pp. 90-99.

Antiquities, 18,23-25.

He contends that a reference to the zealots would not fit that context, that the dating ("from the days of John until now") does not fit, and the verbs would imply "storming" rather than "forcing" (*The Zealots*, p. 388).

See Hengel, pp. 146-148.

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